

# **Meditations: Tuesday of the Twenty-First Week of Ordinary Time**

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the 21st week of Ordinary Time.

- Christ doesn't reject the Pharisees
  - Understanding the meaning of the precepts
  - Cleaning from the inside out
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THE GOSPEL presents us with many encounters between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. We often see Him conversing with them, tirelessly seeking their conversion. This shouldn't surprise us, since "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (*Lk 19:10*). And Christ saw these people as further from the Kingdom of God than the tax collectors and prostitutes (cf. *Mt 21:31*). We know that our Lord never refuses his help to those who need it and does everything in his power to recover the lost sheep. And those lost sheep who were some of the scribes and Pharisees cost him great effort. From the little that we know, in his earthly life He only had few "victories" in this regard. Before his passion and death we see a doctor of the law among his disciples, even if tries to keep this a secret (cf. *Jn 7:50; Jn 19:38*). After his resurrection, we see Pharisees embracing the faith (cf. *Acts 15:5*), some of whom continued

observing the old law, thus giving rise to conflicts in the first Christian community (cf. *Acts* 15:5). While other Pharisees, like Paul (cf. *Acts* 23:6), were marvelously effective in spreading their new faith.

Jesus would probably not have felt very comfortable in some of his encounters with these Jewish authorities. He often realized that their only goal was to use his words to accuse Him. He was also pained by the blindness of their hearts, which prevented them from accepting the good news He was announcing. Despite everything, Christ did not distance himself from them. Perhaps we might think that it would have been better to surround himself only with those who understood his message and listened to his words with affection. But our Lord never refused to dialogue with those who didn't love him. For God doesn't want "the death of the wicked, but that the

wicked turn from his way and live” (*Ezek 33:11*). When addressing them, Christ did so with the desire that they would rectify and change their lives, even when his words were quite harsh: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and dill, and cumin, but have neglected the weightier matters of the Law: justice and mercy and faith!” (*Mt 23:23*).

We can ask our Lord to give us a thirst for souls that leads us to seek the salvation of all men and women, even those who perhaps fail to understand us. “We want to do good to everyone,” St. Josemaría wrote, “to those who love Jesus Christ and to those who may hate him. But these latter make us feel very sad, and so we must try to treat them with affection and help them to find the faith, drowning evil, as I like to say, in an abundance of good. We should never see anyone as an enemy. If

they attack the Church in bad faith, our firm, friendly, upright behavior will be the only means they have, with God's grace, to discover the truth or at least respect it.”<sup>[1]</sup> —

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CHRIST reproaches the Pharisees and scribes for rigorously following human rules while neglecting key divine precepts. But He doesn't criticize the fact that these rules exist. Jesus says that it is necessary to comply with them, but without forgetting what is essential, which is the law given by God. And this is possible if we try to see the good behind everything we do: justice, mercy, fidelity. In a word, love, “for the whole Law is summed up in this one commandment” (*Gal 5:14*). The problem with some scribes and Pharisees was that they had lost the true perspective for all these rules

and had become blind guides, capable of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel (cf. *Mt* 23:24).

Striving to stay close to God with “ever-renewed willingness,”<sup>[2]</sup> out of love, is neither automatic nor simple. That is why St. Josemaría spoke of formation as a “battle” that, besides being arduous, “never ends,”<sup>[3]</sup> The Law needs to be understood correctly, because it has been given for intelligent beings, who are invited to let themselves be guided by it in a deep and not merely superficial way. “Being holy,” the Prelate of Opus Dei wrote, “does not mean doing more and more things, or fulfilling the task of meeting certain criteria we have set ourselves. The path to holiness, as Saint Paul explains, consists in corresponding to the action of the Holy Spirit, until Christ is formed in us (see *Gal* 4:19).”<sup>[4]</sup>

Thus we can understand everything that Christian life entails – commandments, norms of piety, works of mercy – as means to identifying ourselves more closely with our Lord. These practices “are part of a loving dialogue that embraces our whole life and leads us to a personal encounter with Christ. They are moments in which God awaits us, in order to share his life with ours.”<sup>[5]</sup> —

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“WOE TO YOU, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity!” (*Mt 23:25*). Jesus goes right to the root of the problem. He highlights the contrast between what these people manifest on the outside – loud prayers, conspicuous fasting – and what they carry inside: the

desire to appear, the hunger for recognition, “We need to say no to the ‘cosmetic culture’ that tells us to worry about how we look. Instead of our outward appearance that passes away, we should purify and keep custody of our heart, our inner self, which is precious in the eyes of God.”<sup>[6]</sup> —

The path pointed to by Jesus is that of purification starting from the inside out. “You blind Pharisee! First cleanse the inside of the cup, that the outside also may be clean” (*Mt* 23:26). Thus we come to see that the formation our Lord wants for us does not consist in accumulating a great quantity of information, but rather requires strengthening our interior world. It is not a question of welcoming many seeds that grow quickly on the surface to give the impression of fruitfulness. Rather it requires developing a deep and rich soil, capable of allowing the seed

planted by Christ in our soul to germinate.

This is a task that belongs exclusively to each one of us, with the help of grace. While external good works can perhaps be carried out in part under the influence of other persons (either because they encourage us or because the environment impels us), we are responsible for developing our own inner world that enjoys the good we do and rejects evil not because it is a prohibition, but because it distances us from the happiness we long for. And this “requires the capacity to stop, to ‘deactivate the autopilot,’ to acquire awareness of our way of acting, of the feelings that dwell within us, of the recurrent thoughts that condition us, and often unconsciously.”<sup>[7]</sup> The Virgin Mary is a model of a rich interior world that welcomes the word and lets it bear fruit (cf. *Lk* 11:28). Our Lady can help us to walk

faithfully, without deceit, in the footsteps of her Son.

[1] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 4, no. 24.

[2] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 293.

[3] St. Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, 18 June 1972.

[4] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, October 28, 2020, no. 6.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Francis, Homily, 3 November 2018.

[7] Francis, Audience, 5 October 2022.